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XIII

Non-Formal Education in India: A Retrospect and A Prospect

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Programmes of non-formal education in India cannot be looked at in isolation: they must be viewed as an integral part of the total learning system of the society, which consists of three distinct sub-systems—incidental, non-formal and formal. It is only this integrated view, taken in a historical perspective, that can give a clear idea of the major role that non-formal education can play in the much needed radical reform of Indian education which, I hope, will be pursued with vigour over the next two decades.

The Traditional Learning System

Indian society in the early nineteenth century was traditional, feudal, caste-dominated and highly inegalitarian. All intellectual learning, and political and economic power, were concentrated in a few leading castes or classes at the top, while the vast bulk of the people lived in great poverty, deprived of most of the good things of life. The total learning system of the day was in consonance with this social order and was in fact designed to consolidate and perpetuate it. A brief description of its three subsystems would provide a useful starting point for this discussion.

(1) The *incidental* educational subsystem was universal in its coverage and comprised what each individual learnt naturally and incidentally as he grew up at home and in society. It was a result of this process of socialization that every person absorbed the world-view of his society, its traditions and its values. It was also this education that gave each individual a clear concept of his role in his family and society and prepared him to play it to the best of his ability.

(2) The *non-formal* educational subsystem comprised all education outside the formal school which was especially organized by the

family or other local institutions and by individuals who had acquired valuable skills that needed to be preserved and diffused. For instance, children or young people picked up vocational skills by helping in the work done by their families or outside and by working as assistants or apprentices to older members of the family or society. It was in this way that women learnt to manage domestic chores or to bring up children and to contribute to agricultural work or cottage and village industries, and to practise specialized feminine trades like midwifery. Physical education and military training, which were popular with young men, were taught in local gymnasia by competent older men. All fine arts like music, dancing or painting were preserved and propagated by individuals who specialized in them and who taught them to others who desired to acquire a similar specialization. Religious education, generally of a popular type meant for the common people, was organized round temples and mosques and other religious institutions. Literacy was not necessary, for this non-formal education was acquired through oral communication and actual participation. It is also worthy of note that the non-formal subsystem had a variety of types meant for different groups of individuals and suited to their roles and stations in life. It was also quite extensive because almost every individual was exposed to some variety of non-formal education.

(3) The *formal* educational subsystem, on the other hand, was extremely limited in scope but enjoyed very high social status. It consisted of two levels. The lower level included the elementary schools which taught the three *Rs* to the children of the priestly or literary castes like Brahmins or Kayasthas, and to the children of aristocrats, big landlords, money-lenders or traders who had some use for these skills. The proportion of children, mostly boys, who attended these schools, varied from one to ten per cent in different parts of the country. The second level included institutions of higher education which imparted a classical education, mostly based on religion, through the medium of Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian as the case may be. Enrolments in these institutions were even more limited and probably covered only one individual in a thousand.

This total learning system was conducted by individuals, families and other voluntary social institutions without any support or interference from the state, except that kings gave occasional grants to learned men or institutions of higher education. Its

principal strength was that it socialized and prepared every individual for his or her station and role in life, the latter generally determined by caste or sex. Its major weaknesses were stagnation and inequality which were the attributes of the society itself.

The Modern Educational Effort

It was obvious that if this traditional society was to be modernized and if education was to be used as an instrument towards this end, the traditional learning system would have to be reformed in its entirety. This called for simultaneous action on all three fronts, viz., (1) transformation and expansion of the formal subsystem; (2) a modernization of the non-formal subsystem; and (3) a radical reorganization of the incidental subsystem, mainly through direct attempts at social transformation.* Unfortunately, when attempts to create a modern educational system supported or maintained by the state were initiated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this concept of a total learning system did not even exist, and the 'education' of the people was equated only with the extremely small but prestigious subsystem of formal education. It is therefore scarcely a matter of surprise that the British administrators of the period should have altogether ignored the incidental and non-formal subsystems which really educated the vast masses of the people, and should have concentrated instead on merely replacing the traditional subsystem of formal education by the modern system of formal education whose main objective was to spread western science and literature through the medium of the English language. Even in this limited sphere, their efforts were further restricted by their narrow objectives, viz., the desire to create a small class of intermediaries or interpreters between them and the people over whom they ruled; the desire to educate only the upper and middle classes from whom, they felt, culture and education would automatically filter down to the masses in due course; the almost exclusive emphasis on the spread of western science and literature through the English language and the almost total neglect of all indigenous learning; and the unwillingness, for political reasons, to disturb the traditional social and religious life of the people.

*The nature of incidental education obviously depends upon the structures and processes of the society, so that a reform of incidental education has basically to be attempted through social transformation.

A century of British educational effort* therefore yielded only meagre results, both in terms of educational development and social transformation. The traditional subsystem of formal education was no doubt liquidated almost totally. But the modern system of formal education which took its place was also very limited in coverage and was availed of mainly by the rich and well-to-do or the upper and middle classes, many of whom had a modern westernized outlook. On the other hand, the vast masses of the people had little or no access to the modern system of formal education, and continued to be educated, as in the past, through the traditional incidental and non-formal systems alone, so that their life-styles continued largely unchanged. The new educational system thus accentuated the old division of Indian society between the upper and middle castes or educated elites (whose partial modernization had enhanced their political and economic status as well) and the masses of the people (who continued to be traditional, even as they were impoverished and marginal).

Indian control of education, which was only partial between 1921 and 1947, and became total after Indian Independence, did not make any material difference to our basic approach to educational development until very recently. Nor did we evolve the concept of a total educational system for society. We continued both to equate 'education' with the formal educational subsystem alone and to ignore altogether the incidental and non-formal subsystems. We made no attempt to change the basic character of the formal educational subsystem which was mainly the preserve of the rich and well-to-do because of its insistence on a single-point entry (in Class I at the age of about five or six), sequential annual promotions, full-time attendance by students (which compelled children from poor families, who had to work, either to avoid school altogether or to leave it prematurely) and exclusive instruction by full-time professional teachers (which increased the cost of education beyond feasible levels). All we tried to do was to expand the system in a linear direction, partly to meet the increasing demand from the upper and middle classes, and partly in the hope

*This covers the period from 1813, when the East India Company was compelled to accept responsibility for the education of the people, and 1921, when the control of education was transferred to Indian Education Ministers under the provisions of the Government of India Act 1919.

that such expansion would provide 'education' to the children of the masses as well.

But the experience of the last six decades has belied these hopes. The modern educational system in India is now a vast undertaking with over 700,000 institutions, 100 million students, 3.5 million teachers and a cost of Rs 28,000 million (next only to that on defence); and yet its chief beneficiaries are the upper and middle classes who form about 50 per cent of those who complete elementary school, and occupy about 70 per cent of the places in secondary education and 80 per cent of those in higher education. The vast bulk of the poor are still outside the system: 60 per cent of the adult population is still illiterate, and as many as 75 per cent of the children in the 6-14 age-group do not complete elementary school. The masses therefore still continue to be educated almost exclusively through the traditional incidental and non-formal subsystems, which, by mere passage of time, have become even more obsolete today. The gap between them and the upper and middle classes educated in the modern formal school has therefore become even wider than it was sixty years ago.

It may also be pointed out that the attempts made during this period to introduce certain programmes of modern non-formal education have failed to relieve the overall gloom of the situation. The modern press, which is most effective in English, reaches only the English-knowing elite which constitutes less than five per cent of the population. Even the Indian language press does not reach the bulk of the people, who continue to be illiterate. The library movement has not developed adequately, especially in rural areas. Television is still largely urban and elite-oriented. Although the radio and the film have succeeded in reaching the masses, their educational content is meagre or even negative. Of the two programmes of modern non-formal education meant especially for the masses, viz. agricultural extension and family planning education, the former is availed of only by well-to-do farmers and the latter has had little impact on the poor, even if one ignores the atrocities of the target-oriented drives for population control made during the Emergency. All things considered, one can say that even modern programmes of non-formal education have benefited only the upper and middle classes and the rural rich or well-to-do, and that they have done little to educate and modernize the poor or to improve their standards of living.

A Shift in Policy

The first signs of a shift in policy have begun to appear over the past twelve years, and especially after the publication of the Report of the Education Commission (1964-6). The report pointed out that 'education' cannot be equated with the formal school, and that programmes of non-formal education will have to be developed in a big way at all stages of education if elementary education is to be made universal, if adult illiteracy is to be liquidated, if the poor and the working class are to have access to secondary and higher education, and if we desire ultimately to provide lifelong education to all and create a learning society. These proposals received considerable support through contemporary international developments like the world-wide debate on the Report of the International Education Commission appointed by UNESCO (*Learning to Be*) and the general emphasis that now came to be placed, in both developed and developing countries, on expanding non-formal education programmes, partly to make up for the defects of the formal school, and partly to meet the needs of development more successfully. As these discussions progressed, it became increasingly clear that we need to radically reform not only the formal educational system, but also the total learning system of society. Views began to crystallize around some of the basic educational reforms the country needs, which we should strive to bring about in a planned programme spread over the next decade or so. These basic educational reforms may be summarized as follows;

(1) It is necessary to deal with the total learning system of our society in a comprehensive manner and not with the formal educational subsystem alone. This has two implications. The first is that we should strive simultaneously to improve and expand the incidental, non-formal and formal subsystems of education in an integrated fashion; second, attempts at social and educational transformation have to be made side by side, because, in the absence of a social transformation, it will neither be possible to modify incidental education nor to adequately promote non-formal or formal education.

(2) As part of this integrated and comprehensive effort, there is also a clear recognition, in both official and non-official circles, that the almost exclusive emphasis we have placed so far on the formal school, with its single-point entry, annual sequential promotions and insistence on full-time attendance by students, is wrong

because it limits access to the system to the rich and well-to-do and fails to provide an education to the millions of working children, youth and adults. The necessity of thoroughly reforming this system is therefore being constantly emphasized and the state governments are being pressed to initiate programmes which will adopt multiple-point entry, the ungraded system, elastic systems of teaching and evaluation, and large-scale development of the part-time and own-time channels of study.

(3) There is much better pedagogic understanding today of our failure to introduce universal elementary education for all children in the 6-14 age-group in spite of continued efforts made over almost a century, Gandhi's strong pleas for basic education, and the directive of Article 45 of the Constitution. It is now clearly realized that a major cause for this failure is educational, viz., the unsuitable model of the western system of elementary education we unthinkingly adopted in the early years of the nineteenth century. It is now also well recognized that it will not be possible to universalize elementary education for children in the 6-14 age-group by an expansion, however large, of the existing dysfunctional system of formal elementary education with its lack of relevance, poor standards, non-enrolment of about 20 per cent of the total child population (most of them from the poorest social groups) and large wastage rates of 60 to 70 per cent (which have remained almost constant over the last three decades). The need to alter the system radically by relating its content to the environment and lives of the children, by raising standards all round, and by developing large-scale programmes of non-formal education, is also widely acknowledged; and there is no doubt that the reform of elementary education will be broadly attempted on these lines in the years ahead.

(4) There is now, and again for the first time in our educational history, a clearer recognition of the significance of adult education. Although Gandhi described mass illiteracy as a curse and a sin, adult education and the eradication of illiteracy have continued to receive the lowest priority, partly because of the difficulties of implementation and partly because it is argued, quite plausibly, that both these programmes will be automatically taken care of as soon as elementary education becomes universal. But we know better now and have realized that our past neglect of adult education was a grievous error. Adult education will have to be given the

highest priority in the educational reforms of the future for at least two major reasons, viz., (a) adult education and the liquidation of adult illiteracy can, in themselves, be the strongest instruments for the universalization of elementary education, because an educated parent is the best guarantee that his children will attend school and benefit adequately therefrom; and (b) adult education can also be a powerful instrument for early and effective social change and development. This is a major shift in our earlier policies which it would be difficult (or disastrous) to reverse.

(5) While the development of programmes of non-formal education at the elementary stage and in adult education is extremely crucial, it is now also recognized that non-formal education will have to be promoted at the secondary and university stages as well, mainly to provide young working people and adults better access to education at these levels. The programme is also justified on the basis of the long-term objective of creating widespread opportunities for lifelong education.

(6) There are also three major changes in our approach to the education of the poor and underprivileged, which is the one great unfinished task in the education of the people and modernization of society.

(a) In the past, we tried to educate the poor merely by extending the formal educational subsystem to them. This did not work because the children of the poor did not join school, or left it soon after joining, or did not show adequate progress even when they did remain in school. This is why, as explained above, the new strategy emphasizes the need to develop large-scale programmes of non-formal education at all stages meant especially for underprivileged children, the youth and adults.

(b) We have made no attempt so far to improve the traditional systems of non-formal and incidental education to which the poor and underprivileged are still exposed and which form the main, if not the exclusive, means of their socialization and education. These lapses have led to serious negative results. For instance, the incidental education which the poor receive in their homes and day-to-day life continues to be harmful as it tries to perpetuate the culture of poverty with all its underlying superstitions, traditional beliefs, warped value systems, false perceptions of existing social conditions and their causes, and the atmosphere of sheer hopelessness. Similarly, the traditional non-formal education which the

poor still continue to receive also suffers from three major defects: unsuitability to modern social conditions; obsolete ideas and beliefs; and the absence of modern concepts, particularly those relating to science and technology. The new strategy therefore emphasizes the need to modify the traditional forms of incidental and non-formal education to which the poor are generally exposed, so as to make them better and more powerful instruments of social change and development.

(c) In the past, the education of the poor was undertaken in a condescending and paternalistic manner, on the basis of middle-class ideas, values and language which the poor were expected to accept and internalize. This attempt succeeded only where we wanted to educate a select few of the poor and co-opt them within the system by providing vertical mobility. But it failed to educate the poor as a social group or to improve their conditions. We now recognize that the education of the poor has to be organized on a different basis. They will have to be treated as equals and participants in a process wherein the educator learns as much as the educands. They will have to be made aware of themselves and of the social reality around them and given reason to face the future with hope and confidence. Their language will have to be accepted with respect, at least to start with, and the content of education will have to be related to and organized around the solution of their day-to-day problems. In short, we are now becoming aware of a distinct pedagogy of the oppressed which we will have to evolve in our own unique situation in the course of our attempts to educate the poor and improve their living conditions.

(7) Finally, we have now become more keenly aware of the need to relate all education to development. In particular, we have realized that the education of the poor, whether elementary or adult, cannot be divorced from direct efforts to improve their standards of living in which they themselves will have to be intimately involved. A trend has thus begun to combine education and development, especially where the poor are concerned. This is a very significant change which goes far beyond the earlier attempts to merely 'educate' the poor, or to give them an education combined with some welfare services, as a form of charity. It is obvious that this new trend can only be strengthened in the days ahead.

These are important insights that we have evolved in the last

few years in the course of discussions on the Report of the Education Commission (1964-6) and in the light of contemporary educational developments abroad. It is of course obvious that in all proposals of such future reform, non-formal education will necessarily appear as a major instrument of change, enabling us to take an integrated view of the total learning system of our society, to reform the formal school and to extend its benefits to all those social groups which have been denied them so far, to adopt a new and more effective approach to the education of the poor and underprivileged, and to create a more balanced educational and social system in which the existing gaps between the levels of living of the upper and middle classes, on the one hand, and the vast masses of the poor and deprived, on the other, will be narrowed down continually.

The academic consensus on the basis of a major reform of the Indian educational system is indeed a great achievement. It is also a matter of considerable satisfaction that these ideas found support in official quarters and were incorporated, to some extent, in the Draft Sixth Five Year Plan (1978-9 to 1982-3) which provides Rs 9,000 million for the large-scale expansion of elementary education with heavy emphasis on non-formal education for children in the 6-14 age-group (which has no precedent in Indian planning) and Rs 2,000 million for the National Adult Education Programme which proposes to embrace nearly 100 million persons in the 15-35 age-group. The Plan documents do not, of course, endorse all the radical proposals enumerated above. But they do highlight the need to transform the formal school system side by side with the development of non-formal education, to link education with development and to tackle the problem of educating the poor on an entirely new basis. Needless to say, these plan proposals inevitably result in cutting down allocations to those sectors which have received special emphasis in the past, such as the expansion of secondary and higher education or technical education.

Doubts, Dangers, Criticisms and Challenges

It is hardly surprising that these proposals of the Sixth Plan have come in for a good deal of criticism. There is, of course, no disagreement on the basic issues that elementary education should be made universal, that adult illiteracy should be eradicated and that there should be an emphasis on educating the poor and under-

privileged. Neither does anyone contest the proposal that non-formal education should have a key role to play in all this, and that it needs to be developed in a big way. But there are serious misgivings as to whether these programmes can really be implemented with success and whether the scarce resources which are now being invested in them on such a large scale could not have been better used on other projects. These doubts and fears need to be examined in some detail.

The first serious objection is raised on the ground that the kind of social and political atmosphere which would be conducive to the successful implementation of these crucial programmes does not exist. Education, it is said, cannot be planned in a vacuum; and it is therefore rightly argued that the large-scale proposals for the education of the people included in the Sixth Plan, through a major expansion of the non-formal programmes in elementary education and the National Adult Education Programme, require a favourable socio-economic-political atmosphere for their successful implementation. This atmosphere, it is pointed out, would have to have almost revolutionary characteristics. At any rate, it would have to be such that the programme receive full political support and be accompanied by an intensive nationwide programme for the improvement of the living conditions of the poor, giving them hope and confidence in a brighter future for themselves and their children. There is no doubt that these programmes would succeed extremely well if such favourable socio-economic or political conditions were to coexist. They would create the essential conditions required to awaken in adults a desire to learn, would increase the attracting and holding power of programmes for non-formal education, and would make it easier to train and enthuse the thousands of adult educationists needed. It is also equally clear that such favourable conditions do not exist at present and are unlikely to arise in the next five to ten years. The social revolution is not on, it is not round the corner, it is not even in sight. The effervescence created by the Janata victory in 1977 has proved too short-lived; and for the next ten years we may expect a period of serious political instability (if not worse) and grave economic difficulties. The governments, whether at the centre or in the states, are likely to be too concerned with problems of survival, of law and order, of rising prices, of grave shortages and of crisis management to find even the necessary will, time and energy

to pursue the development of non-formal education programmes; and one cannot even predict for certain how keen future governments will be to take the hard decisions needed to improve the lot of the poor. It is also possible that, even in not too distant a future, these priorities may change, the funds allocated may be reduced, the targets whittled down and the programmes drastically revised to their disadvantage. All this, let us concede, is on the cards. What then should we do in such a situation?

One obvious counsel is that of despair: let us give up all these grandiose ideas for the large-scale development of non-formal education and wait till the proper social and political atmosphere develops and creates the conditions favourable to the success of such programmes. The advice is, of course, given with the best of intentions, viz., to direct all our efforts towards first bringing about the political revolution we need and then taking up all such constructive programmes in a revolutionary or post-revolutionary situation. One would have no objection to this proposal, at least in theory, if it were clear that by abandoning these programmes we were bringing the revolution closer. But in practice, the results of this suggestion are likely to be the very opposite: by giving up the attempt to implement these radical educational reforms, we will not necessarily be strengthening the political effort. In all probability, it will strengthen the stranglehold of reactionary forces so that even a future reform of education will become more rather than less difficult, and the possibilities of creating the essential atmosphere will recede rather than advance. All things considered, it is more desirable to look upon the development of non-formal education itself as a means of creating the essential atmosphere because it provides invaluable opportunities to work with the poor, to conscientize them, and to help them organize themselves so that they may better handle and resolve their day-to-day problems. As the programmes of non-formal education really develop, it will not be wrong to hope that the necessary atmosphere will automatically develop and will in turn increase the possibilities for the further development of non-formal education. In other words, we may be able to establish, over time, a golden circle in which the development of non-formal education itself helps to create the essential atmosphere which, in turn, helps to develop non-formal education still further. Developments of this type alone will create the necessary public opinion and prevent the central and state governments

from whittling down the programmes as they will, very probably, want to do. One may even hope that the growing success of these programmes will ultimately help not only to lay the foundations for radical educational reform, but also to create the revolutionary situation itself.

Another objection raised against these proposals highlights the absence of change agents of the right type and in adequate numbers. Who, it is asked, is going to implement these programmes of non-formal education in the proper spirit, with the intention of helping the deprived to come to their own? Some argue that these programmes can best be developed by active political and semi-political organizations, and advocate the close involvement of various political parties, trade unions, and so on. Others are afraid that, in the present situation, such organizations are more likely to misuse the funds available for the programme for their own ends, and urge strongly that they should not be directly involved. The latter view has prevailed and become official policy, more on account of mutual rivalry and jealousy than on merit, and it does keep out a potential group of change agents.

Another source for change agents is the bureaucracy, the officials (mostly of the Education Departments) and teachers who will be concerned with the implementation of these programmes. That the bureaucracy *can* show excellent results in the few cases where good workers are available and are given the necessary freedom, is not denied. But the general fear is that the average bureaucrat and teacher will convert non-formal education programmes for children into a pale imitation of elementary education meant for the poor, and the adult education programme into a literacy ritual—which will lead neither to a reform of the educational system itself, nor to a strengthening of the effort to improve the living conditions of the poor or to conscientizing them. At its worst, the bureaucratic effort often takes the line of least resistance and tries to conceal a failure by producing false statistics and misleading reports, especially when governments set unrealistic targets and insist that the departments concerned achieve them. The possibilities of this happening to the large-scale programmes of non-formal education included in the Sixth Plan are not, and cannot, be ruled out.

Voluntary organizations afford yet another source of change agents. Some of them, especially those who have been engaged over

long periods in constructive work for the poor, have a good band of workers who can be advantageously harnessed to these programmes. Even such voluntary organizations as have done little beyond formal education can provide a reasonable number of good workers who could take up these new tasks with vision and commitment. But such organizations do not exist, at least in sufficient numbers, in all parts of the country, and in many cases even voluntary organizations suffer from the same weaknesses as the bureaucracy, if not worse.

The involvement of university students could have been yet another rich field for the training of change agents. But while some institutions of higher education, teachers and students are being attracted to the field and have made a good showing, the existing situation in institutions of higher education rules out the possibility of large-scale results from this sector. A new group of young non-official workers is now coming into the field, many of whom have given evidence of their vision, competence and commitment. But their numbers, though growing, are still small. On the whole, it does appear that the available stock of competent and committed change agents who can be relied upon to develop the programmes of non-formal education on the right lines, is rather limited and far out of proportion to the demands of the situation or the size of the programme proposed.

Yet another objection to these proposals (which can be considered along with this) refers to the inadequacy of experience, expertise and skilled manpower needed to train the workers, and to produce the materials required by these programmes as well as possible, and in good time. It is pointed out that all these ideas of educational reform through non-formal programmes are brave new concepts based on hope and theory rather than on practical examples of demonstrated success. Attention is also drawn to the extremely complex issues such as those of language, resistance of vested interests, difficulties in the organization of the poor, or building links between education and development, on which little work has been done so far and in which the expertise presently available is far too limited to tackle successfully the immense tasks of curriculum construction, production of teaching-learning materials, designing appropriate methods of teaching and evaluation and training of workers. This is all the more so because our universities and intellectuals, who could have been expected to provide or

investigate solutions to these problems, have generally chosen to dissociate themselves from them instead; and although the basic competence undoubtedly exists, it will be neither a quick nor an easy matter to utilize men effectively in developing programmes of non-formal education.

How does one deal with these obvious shortages of competent and committed manpower and of experience and expertise? Both the well-known techniques to deal with a situation of this type have their advantages and disadvantages. The first method is to cut down the size of the programme, to scale down the pilot projects or experiments and to expand one's activities in the light of experience gained. This method is, of course, theoretically sound wherever the costs of creating prototypes are very high or the risks of premature generalization very great. But one is not quite sure that these conditions apply to non-formal education where the costs of the programme are low and the risks of unwise generalization quite manageable. Moreover, let us remember that this technique has generally not worked in our country. It takes us an unusually long time even to put experimental pilot projects on the ground. Once started, they tend to continue as pilot projects or experiments almost indefinitely and generally it is extremely difficult to evaluate and extend them. If past experience is any guide, it is obvious that the best way to rule out all possibilities of developing non-formal education programmes in a big way over the next decade or so is to convert them into experiments and pilot projects in the Sixth Plan. We must emphasize the fact that we do not have infinite time to solve the problems of our educational system or of the education of the poor; and if they are to be solved in the near future, this is the one technique we will have to avoid.

The other method, which is certainly a little wasteful of financial resources, advocates the mounting of a large-scale effort in spite of admitted shortages of trained manpower, experience and expertise in the hope that these will be built up as the programmes develop, that the wastages in the programme will be reduced as time passes, and that it will eventually be possible to build up a large-scale and efficient programme within a short time and at a smaller overall cost than would have been the case if one had opted for gradual expansion. All things considered, I am inclined to believe that in the Indian situation, the second is the more appropriate alternative to

be adopted. Ours is a large country suffering from deep-seated complex maladies and even the smallest effort to find an effective and early solution to its problems has to be made on a large scale. We usually undertake small-scale programmes on the grounds that competent and committed workers are not available in adequate numbers, without realizing that a fairly large-scale approach is the one way to discover hidden talent and neglected workers. It is also large-scale efforts, despite their many failures, that throw up the largest numbers of successes (as against pilot projects and experiments) and are the only means whereby an educated public opinion, exerting pressure on the government to adopt progressive politics, can be developed. In fact, I am personally of the view that this is not at all an either-or issue. With some planning and a little more investment, it is possible to combine both techniques. There should be intensive, experimental, research-oriented and qualitative work in a few selected centres going on side by side with extensive and large-scale programmes and appropriate links between the two to ensure that the experience of the large-scale projects is fed back into the intensive experiment even as its qualitative findings are fed into the larger programme. This, in fact, should be our policy in the years to come.

Of all arguments advanced against the Sixth Plan proposals, I am the least impressed by those which highlight the possibly wasteful expenditure on non-formal education for underprivileged children, adults and the young and advocate the diversion of funds to traditional sectors like higher education. I would merely point out that the expenditure which we now incur on most traditional sectors is also extremely wasteful. What, for instance, is our precise return on the investment of Rs 600 crore or so that we now annually make in higher education? It would require great optimism to assert that even ten per cent of this investment is properly utilized, and no one will be able to deny that at least half of it produces negative results. What right does one then have to protest that the sum of Rs 40 crore a year proposed to be spent on adult education in the Sixth Plan is a waste and that it could be diverted to higher education? It is a pity that we seldom protest against the immense waste and ineffectiveness of the formal educational system, which benefits primarily the rich and the well-to-do, and that the cry of waste is raised at the first meaningful effort in our history to extend the educational system to the have-nots. Of course,

one realizes how scarce money is in India and one is anxious to ensure that all available funds are used with the utmost economy, efficiency and effectiveness. All the same, we must learn to 'waste' at least some money on the education of the poor and to recognize the fact that even such 'wastage' is really tantamount to 'progress'.

The various reactions to the large-scale programmes of non-formal education for children, the young and adults included in the Sixth Plan are understandable and in keeping with the interests and ideologies of different social groups. The revolution-wallahs underestimate the ultimate potential of these proposals and decry them as reformist efforts that can only cause the ultimate destination to recede further. The ruling classes, with their strongly entrenched system of formal education, yield to these plans in deference to populist slogans of mass education and calls to improve the lot of the poor. But they remain unenthusiastic and will try to divert these funds to the usual traditional sectors (as they have often done in the past) whenever the opportunity allows and in this, they find good allies in the revolution-wallahs who provide them with all the moral arguments to condemn the programmes. Some of the ruling groups see in these programmes yet another opportunity to make a pile for themselves while appearing to serve the poor, as they will no doubt succeed in doing. But the progressive educational and social forces have to rise above these sectional views and strive to be loyal to the ultimate objectives of our national endeavour. We have a poor and inequalitarian society with a wide divide between the standards of living of the top 30 per cent of the people consisting of the rich and well-to-do, and the lowest 50 per cent who live a precarious existence below the poverty line and are deprived of education and most of the good things of life. We also have a highly wasteful and inefficient formal educational system which reflects these social inequalities and which, while providing secondary and higher education to the haves, denies even literacy and elementary education to the have-nots. We have to fight both these evils together and work simultaneously for social and educational transformation. There are but a few ways of doing this. By common agreement, the development of large-scale programmes of non-formal education at all stages (including a new intensive effort to educate the poor and to eradicate adult illiteracy) is one such means. The official inclusion of these programmes in the Sixth

Plan provides both a challenge and an opportunity to all concerned to launch a major offensive for a radical reform of education and society. The need of the hour, therefore, is for all progressive elements to close their ranks and to strive to their utmost to make these programmes a success. There is no doubt that we will succeed in creating an egalitarian society and an effective total learning system suited to our lives, needs and aspirations much more rapidly if we concentrate, over the next two decades, on the seven-point programme of educational reform. This programme, which has been built round a large-scale and effective development of non-formal education, has been described above and it is for the realization of this that the proposals of the Sixth Plan offer a hesitant but hopeful first step.

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